



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release October 28, 1988

Megan Durham 202-343-4131

AS THE FERRETS TURN: ENDANGERED MAMMAL'S STORY  
A SOAP OPERA OF MISFORTUNE AND TRIUMPH

A new episode of the soap opera saga of one of the Nation's most endangered mammals -- the black-footed ferret -- holds promise of a happy ending, after all.

Only a few years ago, some observers were ready to write off the black-footed ferret as "probably extinct." Despite the doom-sayers and a roller-coaster ride of successes and disasters that have befallen their species, on October 18 seven young ferrets born in captivity this year in Wyoming were transported to the National Zoo's research facility at Front Royal, Virginia, carrying with them the hope for eventual restoration of their species in the wild.

Because of their susceptibility to canine distemper, human influenza, and other diseases, the black-footed ferrets could not be safely transported to Front Royal on a regular airliner. Instead, they were shipped on an Air National Guard C-130 cargo plane on its way to Virginia for a training mission. Carefully selected to represent the genetic diversity of the 58 black-footed ferrets still known to exist, the seven ferrets -- and eight more that will go to the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, Nebraska, in November -- will form the nucleus of two new captive breeding colonies. None of the animals will be on public display.

(over)

"Establishing these new breeding colonies helps ensure that the entire population of these rare animals is not eliminated by disease or some other disaster," said Frank Dunkle, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees efforts to restore the Nation's endangered species. "It has taken years of painstaking work by wildlife biologists and researchers to get to this point."

The last wild ferret was taken into captivity in 1987 after disease had virtually destroyed the only known wild population, near Meeteetse, Wyoming. Since then, the only black-footed ferrets known to exist have been housed at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Sybille Wildlife Research and Conservation Education Unit near Wheatland, Wyoming, where encouraging successes with captive breeding have been achieved.

The decision to move some animals from Wyoming -- and the fear that something could happen to destroy all the remaining black-footed ferrets -- are grounded in the dramatic and sometimes tragic ups-and-downs of this native western species. An elusive, nocturnal hunter that lives in prairie dog burrows and preys on prairie dogs, the black-footed ferret once inhabited the Great Plains region from southern Canada to Texas. After its discovery in 1851, it was 25 years before further evidence of the species was found. Its range coincided with the range of the prairie dog, and its radical decline is believed to have been caused by efforts to eradicate the prairie dog.

In 1964, a small population of black-footed ferrets was discovered in South Dakota, but this single known population inexplicably vanished in 1974. Wildlife biologists had guarded against this possibility by taking some animals into captivity for breeding at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. Sadly, although two litters were born there, eight of the young were stillborn and the remaining two kits died after 2 days. The adult animals suffered from diabetes, tumors, and other problems, and scientists speculated that perhaps the South Dakota population was too small and inbred for good health and successful reproduction. The last Patuxent ferret died in 1978.

At that point no one knew whether any black-footed ferrets remained. Wildlife biologists followed up reported sightings, searching at night with spotlights but finding nothing. In 1980 things looked so bleak that a national tabloid ran an "expose" on how taxpayers' dollars were being "wasted" searching for an animal that "may not exist."

(more)

Then, in 1981, a ranch dog killed a strange creature near Meeteetse, Wyoming, and the rancher took it to an alert taxidermist who recognized it as a black-footed ferret. That led to new hope -- the discovery of a small ferret population, estimated to number 129 in August 1984. It looked as though the ferret had returned from the brink of extinction.

Then, another catastrophe. In 1985, canine distemper struck the Meeteetse ferrets, killing most of them. In the fall of that year, six black-footed ferrets were removed from the wild to start a captive breeding program at Sybille. All six of these animals also died from distemper.

Later that year, six more ferrets were caught and held temporarily in Laramie to ensure they were healthy. They were then moved to Sybille, but efforts to breed them the following spring were unsuccessful.

In 1986, surveys estimated that fewer than 20 black-footed ferrets survived in the wild near Meeteetse. Because of a clear risk that the black-footed ferret might become extinct, Federal and state officials reluctantly decided to capture all the remaining wild ferrets.

It appears now as if the risk has paid off, and that the capture of the last 18 wild ferrets may have saved the species from extinction. In 1987, the captive ferrets at Sybille produced two litters, with seven young. Lessons learned from this experience led to improved techniques that resulted in the birth of 13 litters totalling 34 young in the spring of 1988. This brought the total number of black-footed ferrets in the world to 58.

These techniques will now be applied to the captive breeding colonies being established in Front Royal and Omaha. The immediate goal of the program is to increase the number of ferrets. The eventual hope is to reach a total of 200 breeding pairs, or 500 individual animals, by 1991.

After that, the next episode in this continuing melodrama? If the black-footed ferrets really were a television show, viewers might be seeing previews of ferrets being released into the wild, scampering off to renew their species. And while no one can rule out another series of disappointments, for now it appears the story of the black-footed ferret is "to be continued."



Black-footed ferrets. LuRay Parker, Wyoming Game & Fish.

Note to Editors: Black and white prints and broadcast-quality video footage of black-footed ferrets are available for free loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audio-Visual Office, 202-343-8770.